

No Place I'd Rather Be by DigitalMoriarty, NotQuiteHumanAnymore

Category: IT (2017), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aromantic Richie (hinted at at least), Gen, M/M, Max and Eleven and Will are awesome friends, Max takes bets because she loves her friends, Mike is jealous and won't admit it, Richie Tozier is a Little Shit, Richie is Awful, Slow Burn (Sort Of), Sort of Richie/Will but not really, Will Byers is head over heels in love, Steve is the best mom

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Hoffman, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Richie Tozier, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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Summary:

Dustin has no problem solving skills to speak of, Richie is a menace, Will's in love and Max is taking bets.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

The reason this is being posted is because of NotQuiteHumanAnymore. We wrote alternating chapters, me then them, back and forth. Hopefully you'll enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed writing it.

"I heard someone new moved in next to Will."

Dustin's voice is mildly curious as they walked home from school. Will, in fact, was currently home with a nasty flu and they'd planned on dropping by to see if he was feeling a bit better.

"Hope they're nice. Mr. Peterson was a dick." Max replied, lazily peddling next to Lucas as they rounded the last corner. There was, indeed, a moving truck in front of the house to the left of the Byers place.

A woman, dressed in a comfortable looking sweater, wheeled a bike into the garage, offering up evidence that there was at least one kid that was now living there. But that curiosity was set aside in favor of knocking on the door and checking on Will.

Will was, in fact, feeling a bit better and was planning on coming back to school the next day and the rest of their time together was devoted to talking about their days, interrupted now and again by Will's sneezing.

"So you play D&D?"

"My friends and I play. Have you ever tried it?"

"Nah. The Losers Club didn't really go in for that. Is it fun?"

"Yeah! My friend Mike is an amazing GM and it's cool coming up

with what we're going to do."

They all stared. The guy next to Will looked just like Mike, if you changed his hair and shoved a pair of glasses on him.

"Heard you people have monsters here."

"Had. We dealt with them."

Will beamed when he saw Mike and the guy next to him (the new kid) arched an eyebrow.

"This is really fucking weird."

"I'm Mike."

"Richie. Guess you're captain of the nerd squad?"

"And I guess you're a jerk."

"Oh, you wound me."

"Calm down Mike, what's wrong with you man? Nice meeting you Richie. I'm Dustin, that's Lucas and Max and El are showing up soon. Why'd you move here?"

"My old town was a shithole and my parents wanted to try moving a step up in the world. Didn't really work but," he shrugged "what can you do?"

And look, Dustin was no stranger to bad decisions. But he could see the look on Will's face and the look on Mike's face and could feel trouble brewing.

Will's friendly nature is why Richie is provisionally included in the party. He swears like a sailor, offers mocking (if accurate) impressions of their teachers and considerable disdain for a fair number of things.

He also, apparently, has his own experiences with monsters.

And Dustin has learned a lot from Steve and he's known for months that Will was in love with Mike (and the fact that Mike was apparently oblivious was the source of a headache. The least Mike could do was turn him down and let Will try to get over it. He and Steve could bond over Wheeler sibling inspired heartbreak).

And he also sees the look Richie gives Will, when he thinks no one is looking. It's... speculative.

He knows that that brewing trouble is right on the horizon when his search for Will one afternoon revealed Richie crowding him against the wall of the hidden little alley.

And he's about to say something, to step in to protect Will (because they're all protective of Will. He's been through enough already) when he hears "C'mon. It won't hurt anything. And you'll get practice if nothing else. It's not like we're going to fuck or anything."

"You won't tell?"

"What, and bring that shit down on my head too? Besides, you're cute. I'm four eyed, not blind."

And Will's got that little smile, the same one he gets when Mike compliments him and Dustin knows that this is going to go so very *very* wrong.

He sticks around long enough to hear "Okay then. I've never kissed anyone before though," and "You'll figure it out." before seeing Richie cup Will's face.

And then he bolts to tell the others that he hadn't been able to find Will.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

This one was written by NotQuiteHumanAnymore and is being posted early because I've been bribed by comments.

"WE'VE GOT A FUCKING PROBLEM." Came a cry from the door.

Steve didn't fall out of his chair in surprise, but he did, very gracefully, drop to the linoleum to check for new scratches in it. Dustin marched into the kitchen and threw his backpack at the table. "Steve, we've got a fucking problem!" He repeated. Steve stood, nodding nonchalantly, trying to look like he wasn't favoring one leg over the other due to his unceremonious fall seconds earlier.

"What's up, little man?" Steve asked. A few months ago, those words would have wound up with Steve already in his car, three cans of fuel in between kids in the backseat (screw safety regulations in Hawkins, here there be monsters). A few months ago was not today. Today he knew that Dustin was somehow able to out-drama the rest of the party combined. Dustin marched through the door with a "fucking problem" almost four times a week.

"It's bad, Steve, it's really bad."

"Uh huh, I'm sure."

"You know Richie, the new kid who looks like Mike?"

"Is there another new kid who looks like Mike that I need to be looking out for?"

"God, I hope not. This one's causing enough trouble."

"Calm down, the clown dropped the lawsuit, nothing's gonna happen-"

"It's not about the fucking clown, Steve!"

"Wo-oh-oah." Steve chuckled, holding up his hands in surrender.

"Okay, I'll bite, what's wrong?"

"Richie's trying to steal Will."

An immediate concerned furrow appeared between Steve's eyebrows.

"What like, he's trying to kidnap Will? Where did you last see them?"

"No, not like that. I mean I just caught him /kissing/ Will." Dustin spread his hands, as if this made his point. Steve winced.

"Uh, buddy, that's. Whoo. Okay, I know the media likes to-"

"I don't give a shit about the media, Steve, why aren't you listening?" Dustin squawked.

"Okay, just... tell me what the problem is. I'll stop trying to guess." Steve said, trying to placate Dustin.

"Thank you." Dustin said, pointedly. "Will likes Mike." Dustin raised his eyebrows, and Steve nodded, another eyeroll in the works, to show that he understood. "Mike likes Will, too. Richie looks just like Mike. Richie is an asshole, but that's not part of my point, just pertinent information."

"So what's your point, then? I've got stuff in the oven."

"If Will starts dating Richie, Mike is going to go apeshit! He and Will are practically destined, and now Richie is going to come along and fuck it up!" Dustin was nodding, Steve rolled up his sleeves and went to check on the cake, trying to sift through his thoughts.

"Sounds like you need to talk to Will, and tell him you think this is a bad idea."

By the time Steve straightened, Dustin was gone, the screen door swinging in his wake.

3. Chapter 3

"This is a bad idea." Dustin announced and Will blinked.

"What, me multi-classing? I looked at the books and I should be able to pull it off, and Mike okayed it, he just said I'd have to roleplay it out which-"

"No, not that which is also possibly going to be a bad idea but that's not the thing I'm talking about. I'm talking about the you and Richie thing."

"What me and Richie thing?"

And he's known Will for ages and he knows that look. Normally that look would have him glaring at whoever was causing it. But this was important.

"Look it's not something I'm going to get all judge-y over, we've all known for ages that you're not wired like we are. That's not the important thing."

"What is the important thing Dustin?"

"You and Richie is the important thing!"

"Nice to know I'm important Dusty."

He couldn't stop himself from jerking in surprise. There's Richie, leaning against the doorframe, munching on a cookie. Odds were good he's heard everything.

"Now wanna explain what you think is going on?"

Staring at Richie, who arched an eyebrow, Dustin can't find the words. How do you say "Okay I don't know what exactly you two call what you're doing but it's a bad idea. Because Mike's in love with Will except he's an idiot and Max has a betting pool going and Eleven's mostly confused and you're a dick Richie and Will deserves someone

who's nice and also I'm reasonably certain Mike will break your nose if he finds out because the last time you gave Will your jacket and ruffled his hair I heard him swearing under his breath for like five minutes and I talked to Steve and this is just a bad idea. Seriously, you attacked a clown with a baseball bat. We're not going to talk about the Mike ripping the demagorgon and mind flayer pages out of the monster manual and setting them on fire thing." to someone's face?

And Will's looking between them, a little confused line between his eyebrows and a worried moue on his lips. And all Dustin can do is huff and remind Will to ask his mom about sleeping over after gaming. And when Will says "Oh, I'm going to Richie's after." all Dustin can think is 'Mike is going to go postal.'

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Another one written by NotQuiteHumanAnymore

"So don't flip out," is what Dustin leads with, once he gets to Mike's house.

"Where's Will?" Lucas asked, "Steve said he was with you." Dustin made a face. He could feel himself making a face.

"Like I said, don't flip out."

Max makes a face, and he doesn't know how she knows, but she does, and it makes him feel a bit better.

"Will's with Richie." He says it like the bomb that it is, and immediately everyone's eyes are on Mike.

Mike freezes.

His face spasms.

"He's on his way." Dustin added, and Mike slumped into the chair at the head of the table. It rocked a little, like all of them did, and the movement swung Mike's hair closer to his face, obscuring it slightly.

It didn't take a genius to tell that Mike was clearly miserable.

"That's cool. As long as he's coming." Mike declared, his voice dead. He turned his eyes back to Dustin, and Dustin looked over at Max, trying to pass the buck, even though he knew that she didn't have specifics, just that she was good at reading cues.

"Is he staying over after?"

Dustin shook his head. "He's going back to Richie's."

Mike's mouth snapped shut, and they all ignored the clear hurt in his eyes.

"Then why is he even bothering to come over? We wouldn't want to take up his precious time when he could be spending it with *Richie*."

"Mike," Eleven says, her voice quiet, as it always was. This time, Dustin can hear the warning tone in it, too.

"No, no I'm not going to stop, El. He's been ditching us at every opportunity for that kid, why does he even bother sticking around for gaming nights if he's too good to hang out with us, anymore?"

"Mike-

"He clearly doesn't want to be here, and whenever he talks it's always "Richie this" or "Richie that" and at this point he and Richie should just go form a party of their own!"

"Dude!" Lucas hissed. " *Shut. Up.* "

Will stood on the bottom step, his eternally-wide eyes looking straight up heartbroken as Mike turned to face him.

"If you want me out of the party, Mike, all you had to do was say so." Will whispered, his voice somehow quieter than usual, his recent growth spurt meaning nothing as his shoulders hunched in on himself, making him look as small as he did in that hospital bed when he'd first gotten back from the Upside Down.

"Will, I didn't mean it like that." Mike said, and Dustin could only imagine what he was feeling right now, to put that strain on his

voice.

"It's okay." Will squeaked. It most certainly wasn't okay. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, and opened his mouth to say something else, but his lip quivered, and he opted for saying nothing at all when he raced back up the stairs instead.

"Shit." Dustin hissed. Mike turned back to him, clearly half-terrified. Dustin couldn't find it in himself to be sympathetic, not after seeing Will so sad.

"Well, upside, if Will likes assholes now, you're definitely in the running against Richie."

Notes for the Chapter:

MWAHAHAHAHAH

5. Chapter 5

Look, Richie knew himself, okay? He was not Mr. Goody Two Shoes. He wasn't sugar and spice and everything nice. He was swearing and sarcasm and everything two steps from bullying.

And Will Byers was sweet and gentle and loyal and would not shut up about Mike Wheeler if you didn't shut him up yourself. (Richie liked shutting him up, since Will made soft happy little noises that would make anyone feel smug).

But he wasn't a nice person. Not really. Not like Will was.

He'd biked with Will to Mike's house, because Will had asked him to (Will didn't like being alone, and Richie couldn't blame him. If he was honest, he didn't want Will alone either. From what he'd heard, Will was a lightning rod for any nasty bit of weirdness looking for something to grab) and he was heading back to his house when he heard the front door slam.

And he might not have been nice but he wasn't stupid, so he turned around and there was Will, sobbing his too soft heart out, choking on the tears and it's like some massive cat has dug its claws into Richie's heart.

He drops his bike and wraps Will up in his arms and just... lets him cry for a bit.

"Alright, stop sobbing, you don't even have a dog to run over. I'm going to take a wild guess and say someone was a dick to you. So c'mon. We're going to go to my house and eat snack cakes and I'll bust out your birthday present early and teach you to play blackjack."

Will was still hiccuping and Richie yanked his sleeve over his hand before tilting Will's head up and scrubbing the tears away.

"Take a deep breath, get on your bike and suck it up. Can't be worse than when you got stabbed with a red hot poker right? Unless that's what happened again in which case you have the shittiest luck ever and also your friend's sister is fucked up and needs therapy."

And Will can't seem to decide if he wants to laugh or start sobbing again so Richie just gets on his bike and trusts Will's whole 'permanent desire to be someone's right hand' to take over.

When they get back to his place, Richie plants Will on the couch before rummaging around in his room to retrieve the as yet unwrapped present, and returning to drop it in Will's lap.

"Happy early birthday nerd."

And Will is somehow crying and giggling at the same time and wrapping his arms around Richie's waist in a hug.

"Alright alright, let me go, I'm gonna go raid the snacks. You're lucky you're cute and fun to kiss you know. No other reason I'd be watching Pretty in Pink."

And Will's giggling again and that sound could probably cure cancer or some shit.

He's just brought back an armful of snack food and dumped it on Will's head, making the smaller boy flail and squeak "HEY!" when there's a knock on the door.

Will goes still and Richie doesn't go grab a weapon because there's no proof it's an evil clown (all of them. All clowns are evil okay), he just opens the door.

And there's Dustin, panting because he'd apparently run there.

And Richie is not a nice person.

So he smiles.

Says "Nope."

And shuts the door in Dustin's face.

Notes for the Chapter:

Richie is so very helpful isn't he? And has a very understandable vendetta against clowns.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

Another chapter by NotQuiteHumanAnymore

"Dustin wasn't the one who-" Will trailed off, his cheeks going red.

"Made you cry and leave Mike's house alone?"

"Yeah," He croaked. There was the sound of the mail flap, and Will knew that Dustin had something to do with it, but he didn't want to think about it. He didn't want to think about what Dustin probably knew, and what Mike had probably guessed, or why Mike had decided to lash out like that- behind his back, no less.

So instead, he ignored the sound of the mail flap, ignored Richie's sigh as he went to go see what it was, and just pulled his friend- maybe his only friend, after tonight- back onto the couch.

"We're not going to talk about it." Will declared, shoving the VHS at Richie. Richie gave him a small smile, and for all of his talk, it was clear in this moment that Richie, at least, had a small part of his heart that cared about people.

So they curled up and watched the movie.

"Ugh." Richie said, at one point. "This is so weird."

"What?" Will asked, from somewhere against Richie's shoulder.

"Molly Ringwald looks just like my friend Bev. I don't want to think about who Bev has fucked, I already know all the rumors by heart. Molly. Please stop talking about your virginity."

Will snickered, curling in closer. "Thanks, Rich." He said, he didn't say for what. Didn't say whether it was for the movie, for the company, or for letting him forget, for a little, that Mike didn't want

anything to do with him. "Course, dumbass." Richie said, like it was nothing.

Will knew, just as he knew that 'dumbass' was code for 'dearest friend in town,' that it wasn't nothing.

After the movie, Richie's mom walked in, smiling, and Will knows she's just being kind, but his stomach sinks when he sees she's holding what looks like a small mountain of papers.

"These were all addressed to Will," she says and puts them on the coffee table that they'd kicked away so they could lean against the couch. "Someone pushed one through the mail slot and left the rest on the porch."

Will's face spasmed as he tried to make himself smile. "Thanks, Mrs. Tozier." He said politely. Mrs. Tozier smiled at him again, and it was the kind of smile his mom always gave him, the one that made him feel safe, at home. This time, his return smile was genuine.

Or, as genuine as it could be, with the stack of 'letters' in his periphery.

"You don't have to read them, you know. We can burn them in the backyard."

Will leaned over and pressed a kiss to Richie's cheek before he reached over and pawed through the letters, seeing one in each of his friend's writing.

He set aside the one from Mike, not sure yet if he wanted to burn that one or not.

The rest all boiled down to "sorry Mike is an idiot. We're on your side, and Richie isn't bad, I guess."

Okay, so that was verbatim what Max had wrote.

"Sweet." Richie snorted as he took in the last two words.

"At least she didn't call you a dipshit, like Dustin did."

"Eh, I can take a bit of name-calling. You should've seen the fight that almost broke up the Loser's Club."

"Pass." Will said, feeling a weight lift off of his chest, knowing that his friends were still with him.

The weight was counteracted by the letter he had yet to touch. He decided to ignore it, for now. He'd let Richie pick another movie, first.

7. Chapter 7

Richie was awful, so the next movie on the unexpected marathon was freaking Child's Play and Will doesn't know it's going to be bad until he's in Richie's lap, hiding his head in his neck, while Richie snickers at him and calls him a chicken but also rubs his back and talks about how easy it would be to deal with a killer doll.

"I mean, c'mon, it's a doll. Even you could kick it across the room, knife or no knife."

And he wishes he could be sitting in Mike's lap, hearing soothing whispers and maybe Mike telling them to shut the movie off because Will's scared and being able to say "No, it's okay. I know you'll keep me safe," or something.

But that's not going to happen now, is it? He can still hear the words and they hurt even though the rest of the party has made certain he knows they're on his side. That he's not being left alone and he's gotten written evidence of that. And Eleven had said "I don't know what Mike's problem is, but we're going to find out and we're going to fix it." And he doesn't know how to articulate what he's feeling but none of it's good.

But Richie's being unusually sweet and he knows that if he tilts his head up Richie'll grin and move him and kiss him. And he knows if there was a killer doll, Richie would trap it and then set it on fire, probably while laughing and insulting it.

He'd planned on being at gaming until 9, so they're on their third movie by the time he'd originally expected to be at Richie's place and he'd seen that Richie hadn't bothered laying out a sleeping bag or anything while returning from the bathroom.

"What? You're tiny, we can both fit in my bed. Unless you want to sleep on the floor?"

And he blushes and when Richie adds "It's okay if you do. We've got extra blankets and shit," he shakes his head.

They never do more than kiss really (although Richie is always quick to push his warm hands under Will's shirt) even though he knows Richie knows about... more. (He's seen the copies of 'A Boy's Own Story' and 'The Beautiful Room is Empty' and somehow the whole series of 'The Man from C.A.M.P.' and a hidden book the only part of the title visible 'The Joy of-') and he knows Richie wouldn't do more unless Will wanted him to.

"Alright. So. You wanna read that letter? Or want me to get my lighter and a flashlight so we can burn it? Given that you didn't read it earlier, I'm guessing he's the one who royally fucked up and sent you running like someone had suggested sending you to the Arctic?"

And Will doesn't know what to say. How do you explain that your best friend for years, the person who made you realize you weren't like other boys because other boys didn't daydream about dancing with their best friend and getting flowers and kisses on Valentine's Day, the person you probably love apparently didn't want you around anymore?

Notes for the Chapter:

So, at least in this fic (not all fics as my works page provides evidence of), I headcanoned Richie as aro. But he's a good friend even with his clown related vendetta. And after the thing with the Mind Flayer Will seriously hates the cold. Also, as a bit of trivia, all the books mentioned actually exist and existed during the time both Stranger Things and IT are set.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

Another one of NotQuiteHumanAnymore's chapters!

He doesn't say anything. For a long time, he doesn't say anything, just listens to the cacophony of the movie behind him and tries to decide what to do.

If he burns the letter, and it's good, he'll never know.

If he reads the letter, and it's bad, he'll lose Mike forever.

If he ignores the letter and pretends it doesn't exist, then it doesn't have to be either.

But he wants it to be good. He wants Mike to say that he loves Will, too, even though Mike has no idea what his feelings are.

Right now, more than ever, he wants Richie to be Mike, which isn't fair.

With an exaggerated sigh, Richie leans around where Will is curled up in his lap and pauses the movie.

"What did he say?" Richie asks. "You're not going to stop crying into my shirt until you figure out what to do, and tear stains are harder to get out than blood stains. Trust me."

"I worry about you. Also, that's wrong. Like, not even close to true."

"It's true if the tears are also blood."

"Ew."

"What did he say?" This time, Richie's voice is softer, and his hand, where it's curled around Will's spine is gentle. Will fought to remember, thinking past the haze of hurt to try and figure out what Mike's exact words were. He sat up, wiping his cheeks on the back of

his hand and drew in a few calming breaths.

"He said that I shouldn't have bothered coming over for gaming, since I was coming straight back here anyway. He said that you and I might as well form our own party. He thinks that I think I'm too good for them, and I don't want to hang out with them, anymore."

"But gaming is, like, all you talk about. I can't get you to shut up about it." Will snorted.

"Yes you can."

"Yeah, but like. Conversationally, I can't. Because you're a big dweeb who loves his dweeb friends."

"Your friends called yourselves the 'losers,' you're in a glass house, Tozier." Richie sighed and leaned down to press a kiss to Will's forehead.

"Dweeb," He muttered, before saying "What if, and I'm just spit-balling, because I know that this is probably true, Mike is jealous of me? Rightly so, because I'm awesome and he should want to be me, but it would explain a lot."

"Mike shouldn't be jealous of anyone."

"Pfft. Sure, okay. But say a dashing young man with his exact face came to town and swooped up his best friend for extended makeout sessions-" Will's face flushed. "I'd say that's grounds for jealousy."

Will couldn't look at Richie. He couldn't look at the letter. He wound up staring at the slightly blurred, flickering image of the paused movie.

"But what if that's not it? What if he doesn't want me around anymore?"

"Then we steal Steve's baseball bat-"

"No."

"-and we take it to his mailbox. Geez what did you think I was going to say, Byers? Even I wouldn't take a bat with nails in it to another dude's nards."

"You're so gross. Why do I like you?"

"Because I'm a good kisser." Richie nodded, as if that explained everything.

"Nah... that's not it." Will said, just to hear Richie's indignant shriek.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Vague mentions of period typical homophobia?

So, he knows Mike doesn't know about the making out thing. He's not even sure how Dustin knows and would Dustin tell everyone? He hopes not. He's about 75% certain that if someone tried to beat him up, someone would come to his rescue. Be it a member of the party or Steve or Richie (And he hopes on their fictional behalf it's not Richie. He's seen Richie fight. Richie *bites* .) he won't be alone.

But... it's still Hawkins. His mom might have sat him down for an awkward talk about no matter who he loves it's okay, as long as they love him back and she *had* walked in on them making out. And that had led to another awkward talk about protection and when he'd told Richie later he'd literally fallen over laughing. Because Richie was awful and really good at kissing and looked just like Mike, even if he didn't act like him.

And he'd asked once, laying outside in the backyard wearing one of Richie's sweaters, if they were boyfriends. And Richie had arched an eyebrow at him, and rolled his eyes and asked "Have I ever taken you on a date Byers?"

"Well. No. Not really. Not unless you count going with me to the arcade."

"Which we don't. I'm not your boyfriend. I don't really think I'll ever want to be anyone's boyfriend. But you're fun to kiss. And I'm sure once you're out of this backwards shithole of a town being all fabulous you'll find some guy who's dumb enough to go in for all that crap and he'll have to send me a thank you letter for teaching you how to kiss."

And he'd punched Richie's arm, and Richie had laughed and told him

he punched like a girl and Will had told him he better not let El or Max hear him say that and they'd laughed and watched the stars until Will started to feel the cold.

It feels like the letter is looking at him. And he keeps replaying what Mike said. How could Mike think that? He only spends so much time with Richie because Richie lives right next door. And Richie misses his old friends and Will knows all about monsters too so it sort of works. And he'd tried to make Richie welcome in their group, because he knows how much being alone can hurt. Which... had gone okay. At least Richie and Max sort of get along because they're both awesome at video games and Lucas cooperates because people on the moon can see how much he likes Max.

"Alright Byers. Either open it or burn it. Or both. You already know that your whole group of weirdo friends are on your side. If he was enough of a dick to be an asshole in his letter, you can just sic them on him. Which I'd probably pay to watch. I mean, I'm pretty sure Harrington would go all Mama Bear on him if he found out, since that guy thinks he's like... your stupid haired mom. He's on the PTA." "He kicked ass at the last bake sale." "I'm sure. And you're stalling. Do it or I'm taking it and reading it out loud in my most dramatic voice."

And really, Will doesn't have much of a choice after that.

He moves out of Richie's lap, and his hands shake a little as he opens the envelope.

He's still until Richie starts loudly humming the Jeopardy tune, and Will glares at him before carefully pulling out the letter.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is what happens when two people write a fic together. They play hot potato with some chapters.

In particular 'you write the letter' 'no *you* write the letter'. (I won. Hence why you have to wait until next chapter for it!) ALSO Mom Steve is the totally on the PTA.

10. Chapter 10

The top of the letter is familiar, the words settle him, make him feel less like everything is ruined.

/Party rules/

/1. Friends don't lie, cheat, or hurt each other.

I know I've got a bad track record with rule one,/ The letter reads, / but I want you to know I didn't mean it. I don't want you to leave the party. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable around any of us. I know I was a dick, and I'm sorry. Since I drew first blood (metaphorically, this time), if you want, I will leave the party. And if you don't want that, then as a gesture of goodwill, we'll I'll welcome Richie into the group. Personally. He can be an official party member.

I don't want you to leave the party. We're not the same without you, and I'm sorry I drove you away./

Will read and re-read the letter, his eyes lingering on the repetition of "I don't want you to leave." He didn't want to read into that, but there was a tiny part of his brain that was singing that Mike didn't want Will to leave him.

Richie propped his chin on top of Will's head. He pointed to something that had been shoddily erased beneath the last line of the letter without saying anything. Will shoved Richie away, scrambling to his feet to hold the letter up under the lights.

/Please don't replace me with him./

"What if it wasn't enough?" Mike whispered. Dustin could practically hear Lucas's eyes rolling.

"Then you need to suck it up and apologize in person."

"They slammed the door on *you* Dustin. You didn't do anything wrong. Imagine how Richie would have reacted to seeing me."

"Woulda taken a rock to your face, probably." Lucas muttered sleepily.

"I can't believe I said all those things."

Dustin scoffed. He couldn't help it.

"C'mon, man. Don't be dense."

"I'm not-"

"You are." Dustin said, his voice brooking no argument. "You're threatened by Richie, and now Will is all close to him, and we all know that if it were Lucas or I, you wouldn't be acting this way. Shit it's like you're twelve again, dude. Not cool."

Mike mumbled something about 'being unfair' and Dustin's mom being twelve.

"Just tell Will you like him, man. What's the worst he can do?" Lucas sighed, clearly just wanting to sleep. Dustin shut his eyes in frustration.

"I don't- That's not-"

"Yes. It is." He and Lucas growled simultaneously.

"Just tell Will his hair looks pretty." Dustin grumbled. "Steve says that always works."

Silence reigned for a moment.

"What if he doesn't even read it?"

"Then tell him his hair looks pretty."

"What if Richie-"

"You mean more to him than Richie does, dude. Richie's just closer to him than you are, physically."

"Dude-" Mike whined.

"Not what I meant." Lucas sighed.

"Well-" Dustin said, before he could stop himself. Mike shot up from the tumble of blankets they were all buried under, and Dustin could

see the desperation gleaming in his eyes. He groaned.
He shouldn't have said anything.

Notes for the Chapter:

FINALLY GOT TO MIKE'S LETTER which
NotQuiteHumanAnymore did a wonderful job with

11. Chapter 11

Okay, so. Steve had talked to him. About words and being careful with them and also about not getting drunk and saying things you probably meant to keep hidden like not actually liking the person you're dating even though you know they love you, stop looking at me like that brat I am pulling this out of thin air. Do you want more sports analogies? Because I can give you more sports analogies. And Dustin had tried okay? He had. But sometimes things slipped out.

"Look I've seen them like holding hands and stuff. But you know how Will is. He likes being all touch-y feel-y."

It was an unspoken, unofficial party rule, that you didn't talk about the fact that they were like... 75% certain Will wasn't into girls like the rest of them were.

And it's a lie and he's not supposed to lie but he's also 75% certain that if the words "I saw them kissing" pass his lips, they are all going to have to grab Mike. And he knows that if Mike and Richie got into a fight, Mike would lose (look, they'd all seen the thing with the clown okay).

"Holding hands?"

And okay, Will's touch-y feel-y but he's only ever really held hands with people when he's feeling especially shy (lately at least, since they'd all hit double digits. He can still sort of remember an even tinier Will not wanting to let go of Mike's hand) and he's not sure what the expression on Mike's face means, but it can't be anything good.

So he does the sensible thing.

"Be right back!"

"Dustin!"

"I'm just going to the bathroom, jeeze."

It takes three rings before Steve answers the phone, groggy and grumpy and also immediately concerned as soon as Dustin says "Everything's gone wrong."

"Like, I need my bat and gasoline wrong or...?"

"Like Will left the house crying and we're not sure if he's going to want to stay friends with us and Richie slammed the door in my face when I went to check because he's a jerk."

"...explain."

"Um. I tried to do what you said about talking to Will except Richie was there and sort of heard me start saying something and then I ended up telling everyone that Will wasn't sleeping over because he was staying with Richie and then Mike... kinda was a massive idiot and Will overheard him saying some things and got really upset which I super don't blame him for because I'd have punched Mike if it were me and then I tried to go check on him but Richie slammed the door in my face. And we all wrote Will letters because it was that or try and force the door open and I'm like 90% certain Mike's letter couldn't fuck things up worse because I don't think anything could have fucked things up worse and we all tried to tell Will that we don't want him to leave the party or anything but somehow I don't think he's going to be coming with us to the arcade tomorrow and none of this ever would have happened if Mike had just told Will like "I think your hair is cute" or "You have really pretty eyes" or any of that stuff because we all know he's in love with Will, even Eleven knows that and Will's Will and Mike's an absolute idiot because he's somehow missed the fact that Will is completely in love with him and just... what are we supposed to do if he decides it's better to just hang out with Richie all the time? Richie is awful."

The words are all out in a rush and there's silence on the other end of the line.

"Okay. How about you try that again. With words that make sense."

"...Mike fucked up, we tried to fix it, we don't know if it worked. Also, Richie's awful and Will deserves better."

"See? Words that make sense. Okay, it is like... fuck off o'clock so you dipshits are all going to sleep and dream of whatever kids like you dream about and tomorrow morning I'll come by and talk. I'm sure it'll all be fine."

Except Dustin isn't sure. He keeps seeing Will's face. Those huge eyes and the tears and the hurt. And he'd done his best with his letter. Told Will that their party wasn't going to break up just because their favorite wizard had hired a kobold to help carry his stuff and that they all knew Mike was being an idiot and they were all firmly on Will's side in this and none of them wanted Will to go anywhere. That Will was like the brother he'd never had and he wouldn't know what to do with himself without Castle Byers and it's tiny lord and just because Will was hanging out with a dipshit that happened to look like Mike didn't mean they loved Will any less.

...But he'd seen Will over Richie's shoulder, a sliver of the couch, Will wrapped in a blanket and surrounded by snack food and looking like he hadn't stopped crying since he'd left the Wheeler's.

But it has to be okay. He doesn't know what the others had written, just took the paper Eleven had shoved at him (because apparently she'd read it in a book somewhere and her eyes had been scary when she handed out the pens and dropped the envelopes on the table and where had she even gotten them?) but he has to believe that it'll be enough.

They'd gotten Will back from the Upside-Down and saved him from the Mind Flayer, they weren't going to lose him just because Mike Wheeler was an idiot who didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

Notes for the Chapter:

Steve is A. the best mom and B. not paid enough for

this shit.

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

Another NotQuiteHumanAnymore chapter

Richie is snoring in bed next to him when Will can't take it, anymore. He unfolds the letters in a circle, looking at the written proof of his friend's love and support and he smiles at El's in particular. She'd drawn a picture of them smiling, their arms around each other. She'd gotten a lot better, after doodling sessions with Will became a bi-weekly thing.

They'd worked through the Upside-Down together and moved on to more fun things. She'd taught him how to meditate without screaming, and he'd taught her... everything he knew.

His eyes moved to Dustin's, and he couldn't help but wonder how Dustin had found out about Richie. He couldn't help but wonder why Dustin had tried to warn him.
Probably because of this.

His fingers were already tracing the faded indentations of the last line of Mike's letter when his eyes swung over there.

Mike didn't want him to leave.

Mike was willing to sacrifice his pride to make Will *and* Richie feel welcome. That, more than anything, convinced Will that he was still wanted. He knew that none of the others would have suggested he add that. None of them really liked Richie enough, save Max, and Max wasn't the type of person to butt into other people's emotions. He chewed on his bottom lip for a second. He knew he wasn't going to sleep tonight. He knew that he wasn't going to have a chance.

He rummaged in the bag he'd brought and drew out his notebook (not his sketchbook, because those were too expensive for him to get another one if he wasted too much paper) from amongst the books and clothing. He snagged a pen off of Richie's desk and scrawled individual responses to each letter.

When he got to Mike's he paused.

He didn't write the full letters he'd given anyone else.

To Mike he just wrote six words.

/No one will ever replace you./

When he was done, dawn was brewing, and Richie was starfished across the bed. Will kicked one of his legs away and tossed Richie's arm up to lie across his face and flopped down onto the bed. He was asleep in seconds.

13. Chapter 13

Steve was making breakfast in the kitchen when they came upstairs. Everyone but Dustin starred and Steve snapped "You all know damn well I cook. Now sit or the only people getting this are the Wheeler parents."

They all scrambled over themselves to sit. Steve made awesome breakfast.

"So. You are going to tell me why Dustin woke me up at a stupid hour of the morning because apparently being unable to shut up is in the Wheeler genes."

Mike glared but didn't say anything, just shoved toast in his mouth.

"Dustin woke you up because he's an overdramatic whatever. Mike threw a tantrum because Will wasn't sleeping over, Will heard him being an idiot because apparently we live in the most cliché of movies and Richie is probably getting Will to help him on his anti-clown crusade even as we eat chocolate pancakes. We tried to fix it by the way. Eleven came up with the idea to write him letters. We're supposed to see him at the arcade this afternoon, since his mom was going to take him shopping for new clothes. But I'm willing to bet if we do see him, he'll be there with Richie."

"Max."

"Oh hush Lucas, you know he's the only one who has a chance at beating me and if Mike doesn't want a cheerleader on his side Richie's happy to have someone stroke his ego."

Mike gave Max a dark look, but still didn't say anything.

"We should have a meeting at Castle Byers."

Eleven's tone is calm as she takes neat bites of her waffles.

"Richie doesn't know the password yet, and it's Will's territory. He'll feel safe there."

"How do you know he doesn't have the password?"

"Will told me. During our drawing session last week. He was thinking of telling him, but decided not to. The castle's for party members and Richie isn't part of the party." The look she gave Mike then spoke a library's worth of volumes.

Steve just watched them, expression half fond and half like he wanted to beat all of them to death with a pillow.

Breakfast after that was mostly silent, and lasted a good hour because Steve took cooking breakfast seriously and then made them help him clean up. (The muffins were worth it though).

And just when they were debating what to do next, the doorbell rang.

Steve, with his longer legs, got there first and opened it to see Richie, looking somehow both amused and annoyed.

"Here. From Will. My sincerest felicitations to Mike for being able to dress himself, because given how brainless he was last night, I'm honestly impressed he managed it."

And then Richie was darting away, back to his bike, before Mike could do more than let out an inarticulate snarl.

"Why the hell is Will hanging out with him again?"

The words "Because he looks like Mike and is willing to make out with Will" press against Dustin's teeth but he's not about to let them

out.

Max saves him with a "Because Will is sunshine and light and we all gather to bask in his glow," her tone full of sarcasm as she rolls her eyes at her boyfriend.

Steve, folded papers still in his hands, heaved a sigh and valiantly didn't hit his head against the wall.

Notes for the Chapter:

I was silly and accidentally posted chapters out of order. BUT IT'S FIXED NOW. (this is why I shouldn't update on less than 2 hours sleep)

14. Chapter 14

Steve wondered sometimes if he didn't need to start charging the kids' parents for the bullshit that he kept getting put through. He looked down at the letters, carefully addressed to each one of the kids in the room, and decided that, yeah, he wasn't paid enough to clean up their shit, but he loved them all the same.

Mike watched, barely breathing, as Steve passed around the letters. He shuffled one to the bottom of the stack and realized that it had to be his. Steve was making him squirm for a reason.

Steve stopped in front of him, his face deathly serious.

"No more Wheeler bullshit, okay, kid? You're better than that. If he decides to forgive you, you gotta come clean."

Mike nodded mutely. Steve held out the envelope with his name, and he kind of forgot how to work his hands. Steve rolled his eyes and slapped the envelope against Mike's chest and let go, so that his reflexes caught up and he caught the envelope before it landed on the floor.

He could see that everyone else had gotten cute little thank-you's, Eleven was already showing off the sketch that Will had done for her.

His eyes blurred as he tore into the envelope. There wasn't a long, heartfelt anything, and he almost set the letter down without reading it.

But it was just short enough that his mind processed the words the moment that his blurred vision looked at them.

He bit his lip, his hopes raising from the ashes. He thought he'd done a good job erasing that line, but Will knew his handwriting well enough to pull it from spotty invisible ink.

He'd responded to the one thing that Mike had really wanted him to.

He hoped that that meant what he thought it meant.

Notes for the Chapter:

Getting close(ish) to the end! Only another... 15 or so chapters to go?

15. Chapter 15

Will liked going shopping with his mom, even though she always apologized that she couldn't get him new new things. They were still new to him and today at least, being away from Hawkins was the best thing ever.

He wasn't running away from his problems, okay? He was running away from his response to his problems. Totally different thing.

He was also faintly dreading going to the arcade that afternoon. Oh, he knew he could look forward to hugs from Eleven and probably Max ruffling his hair and telling him that he was a sap and Dustin punching him in the shoulder and Lucas reminding him that Mike didn't get to decide if he was out of the party and if he tried that shit, Eleven would dangle him by his ankle.

But also... well. Mike would be there.

And he kept reminding himself of what Mike's letter had said.

There was a part of his heart that was still bruised, the bit of him that was always a bit scared and cold and whispered terrors in the night, but the rest of him was reminding him of when he was sick and Mike wouldn't let go of his hand, the dirty looks Mike had given his sister for weeks, because she'd saved Will but she'd also stabbed him with a red hot poker, the fact that Mike had never given up, never stopped trying to get him home.

Mike might not love him back and 100% did not want to do what he and Richie did (although he wasn't going to admit to having late night fantasies about Mike gently pinning him and smiling at him the way he used to smile at El and nibbling on his neck. Mike wouldn't

need Will tugging on his hair to remind him not to leave marks and wouldn't smirk and kiss him extra hard and say "What, don't want the whole school jealous?" Although if Will had to be honest he didn't entirely mind) but Mike didn't want him gone.

He ignored the whispers of "If he didn't mean it, why did he say it?" coming from that cold, bruised place. Steve had once told him that sometimes people said things they didn't mean because they were hurting and wanted people around them to hurt too. Besides, Lucas had promised in his letter, right after the whole 'We all know you're Eleven's favorite and I'm pretty sure Mike just used his 'get out of retribution free' card' thing. "If he ever says anything like that again I'll sic Max on him. You're part of the party and we all know the only time you've ever ditched us for him is when you had to keep him from setting fire to a circus."

They're his friends, his party and they won't abandon him.

His mom must know something happened (because she always knows when he's been upset. It was a mom superpower. He's not sure how Steve got it too though) because she gets him a new nail polish after they're done at the third thrift store. She also doesn't say anything about his determined acquisition of the warmest sweaters he could find.

And all too soon, she's kissing his cheek and telling him to have fun and handing him the quarters she had in her purse, and he's at the arcade.

And there's Max, clearly the lookout assigned to wait for him.

"They're trying to beat my high score at Dig Dug again. I took shelter from the tragedy. Oh, and Richie is making sure his name is the only

one on the Gyruss scoreboard. C'mon."

Notes for the Chapter:

A. I figure after the Mind Flayer thing, Will would absolutely hate being cold

B. Gyruss is an actual 80's arcade game. Because only the finest research for my readers (...AKA a couple of Google searches)

16. Chapter 16

Will didn't know what he expected to happen when he walked up to his friends, Max's protective arm around his shoulders. He'd refused to think about it, because his mind helpfully reminded him that there was every possibility that they'd changed their minds and they'd say, "oh what are you doing here? We clearly didn't want you to come."

But Max being there meant that hadn't happened, right? He flicked his eyes to her neutral face, trying to glean some small amount of information from her before everything went to shit, because it would.

He heard Richie cackling over on the other side of the arcade, his voice carrying distinctively over the noises of the rest of the games, the laughter of the other people waiting and playing in turn.

The two rounded a corner in the maze of the arcade games, and Will's eyes immediately found his friends. Dustin was at the controls, Lucas cheering him on, while Eleven smiled that small smile that meant that she was happy to be home. When she looked up and saw him, her smile got that much bigger.

It took a bit longer to see Mike, standing off to the side, and staring at Will as though the mere sight of Will could drown him. Will felt his heart start to hammer in his chest, the barest difference between how it usually skipped beats at the sight of Mike to now, where he was clearly panicking. Max squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"If he does something stupid, I've got a whistle that should drown him out." She said, flicking the chain around her neck.

"Why do you have a whistle? Where did you get a whistle?"

"Stole it from my stepdad. Thought it might come in handy. He hasn't noticed yet, and I've had it for months. But if he asks, I've got a cover

story in place."

Will looked at her, still puzzled, as they made their way towards the party.

"Look who I found!" She crowed, pushing past some other people and steadfastly ignoring the dirty looks she was getting. Will got a distracted pat on the head from Dustin, who was a paltry hundred points from Max's score. Lucas gave him a quick half-hug and hid a smile when Max pressed a kiss to his cheekbone. Eleven wrapped him in a real hug.

"Glad you're here." She whispered. "It's bad without you." She stepped back and regarded him for a moment before seeming to decide he was okay. And then he was standing back and watching Dustin play like there was nothing wrong.

A hand brushed against his elbow and he felt his stomach sink.

They didn't *have* to talk about this, did they? One look at Mike's guilt-stricken face said that yes, they did. Will tried to smile, but he was sure he looked like he'd been punched in the gut. Mike looked the same.

"Can we talk for just a second?" He asked, loud enough to be heard, but low enough that only Eleven shot Mike a glance.

Will nodded and tried to cool his raging emotions as Mike took his hand and led him outside.

Notes for the Chapter:

We took a little break for the holidays, but now back to posting!

17. Chapter 17

Steve didn't know how he'd ended up with this gig, okay? He just sort of... had. But they were all his kids now. He'd made lunches and listened to problems and hosted parties and kicked fucking Karen's ass at bake sales (and when the fuck had he gotten good at baking? He didn't even remember). He'd helped with homework and given rides and okay punched a 14 year old because he dared anyone to resist Will Byers when his lip was wobbling and he was obviously trying not to cry. The brat deserved it okay?

Richie Tozier was not one of his kids. But he was... well, understandably a bit of a mess. He might have been a menace and either a future radio star or a maximum security inmate but he was nice to Will (well, as much as he was nice to anyone) and Steve was willing to give him a bit of leeway.

And really, it wasn't his fault the Wheeler drama happened. That would be like blaming alcohol, placing responsibility on the catalyst.

"Okay Dustin. Listen to me. Mike was an idiot and it's his job to fix it, but keep making sure Will knows you're all there for him. I've got work today, but call me if anything goes catastrophically wrong. And I mean 'you adopted another monster' or 'Will's been kidnapped again' wrong."

And it's boring at the office, even if he does keep his eyes out for potential indicators of awful on the horizon (look, he'd learned his lesson. He kept his trunk stocked with everything he might need if things went Wrong).

But he figures he'll either come back to Mike with a broken nose or holding Will's hand. Just as long as he doesn't get a "Okay so um we need a baseball bat, a lot of fire and probably the Army" call it's all good.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is what happens when two people write themselves into a scene that neither of them is quite sure how they want it to go. They go and write all the other possible scenes *around* that scene.

In other news, because this is short, you get another chapter!

18. Chapter 18

Eleven watched Will and Mike go with worried eyes. She knew Will was good. She knew how far Mike would go for Will, but she couldn't know what he was thinking right now. She hoped that he was going to make things right between the two of them, but there was no outward tell in Mike's face, in the nervous set to his shoulders that said he was going to stick to the plan they'd made over Steve's breakfast this morning. She turned back to the screen they were all watching Dustin play on and wondered again if she'd be able to use her powers to play, or if she'd short the game unit out.

There was really only one way to find out, she thought as Dustin groaned, the "Game Over" screen flashing on the console.

"My turn!" She cried over the hoots and cries of Dustin and Max. Max grinned at her and tugged Dustin to the side.

"You gonna try what we talked about?" Max asked, her voice excited. Eleven could feel power thrumming through her veins. They'd been working on what Max called "Detail work" recently to see what she could do with the full scope of her powers, not just the larger, more overt things.

"Yes." Eleven replied, a smile of her own on her face as she slid the quarters that Hopper had given her into the game.

"Bitchin'." Max said, the word only slightly teasing.

She'd have to introduce Max to her sister, someday. She had a feeling they'd get along.

Notes for the Chapter:

Still going through the short scenes around The Scene.

19. Chapter 19

Notes for the Chapter:

Vague implications of period typical homophobia,
but nothing major

Lucas doesn't really think about it, okay? He knows what everyone says but he's never felt Will's eyes on him or anything creepy. Will dances with girls because he can't dance with boys and paints his toenails and draws and draws and had his mother teach him to sew and is their friend.

It doesn't matter if he's the thing Lucas's mind won't acknowledge. And it'd be obvious to a blind badger that he's in love with Mike, and Lucas might be... awkward about it, if it wasn't equally obvious Will would never say anything about it. Will was good and kind and sweet and would be horrified if someone felt uncomfortable around him. He felt bad enough about the zombie boy thing. And he's like... half sure Mike loves Will. Which, given the whole thing with Eleven (which had thankfully died a calm death, leaving them solid friends) was confusing.

And you'd have to be dead (or Will Byers) not to see that Mike was jealous of Richie. Who wore glasses and shorts in most weather and got regular detentions for swearing and had serious issues with clowns and looked just like Mike and lived right next door to Will.

He'd be jealous too, if someone that looked just like him moved in right next to Max. (He's never bothered feeling jealous of Will for how close he is with Max. Will's like the brother Max had always wanted but never got and Will found a book on braids for her and made her bows and scrunchies and was generally just aggressively *Will* in her general direction)

He has, sometimes, wondered what it would be like if Will and Mike were together. What would change? Not much probably. Wasn't like they'd be able to do most things people who were dating did together. Maybe he'd see them kiss and hold hands and cuddle? But they already held hands sometimes, especially when Will was feeling shy and they all already cuddled Will, whenever he was scared or cold or just needed an extra reminder that he's here and not there.

And he's wondered, just once or twice, what would happen if Will started dating Richie. That is not a thing to be contemplated. He has no doubt that if there was a monster to fight, they'd absolutely want Richie on their side (everyone knew about the clown) but someone like Richie dating Will?

But he knows Richie's nice to Will, gives him hats and scarves and sweaters to wear whenever Will gets cold and is quick to swear at anyone who takes up the old mockery ("They could at least be creative. I mean, for fucks sake, there's got to be better things to call you.") and okay, Richie probably (absolutely) knows that Mike is jealous and probably (absolutely) does half the Will related things he does just to piss Mike off but that's only half of them.

So while he sees Richie ensure his name is currently first, second, third, fourth and fifth places on the leader board and watches El ignore a nosebleed in favor of making the game do exactly what she wants for all of fifteen minutes before something goes fzzzt and the screen goes dark (and sixteen quarters dropped out and he's not sure if that was intentional or not) he also tries not to think about what Mike and Will might be talking about.

He likes to think that Mike is more than smart enough to not fuck everything up worse but then, Mike apparently didn't realize that he was jealous, so who knew?

He blanks those thoughts out with laughing at the look on Eleven's face and grinning as Max wipes away the blood and drags the other

girl off to another game (after grabbing the quarters of course) and calls over to Richie "Better be careful Tozier, wouldn't want you to waste your quarters just to see me take the top spot again."

20. Chapter 20

Dustin was good at ignoring his surroundings, but he felt it like a physical loss when Mike and Will wandered away from the party. After what had happened the day before, he felt vaguely responsible. He felt as though he needed to stick by Will's side, in case Mike decided to be a grade-a pain in the ass again. He swore as he lost and wondered if it was a sign. His mother was always going on and on about signs, after all. Maybe him dying in-game was a sign that he needed to go after Mike and Will- that he needed to moderate...

He half turned away from his friends, craning his neck to see if he would still be able to catch them before things got weird and ran smack into someone's shoulder.

Or, rather, someone's shoulder ran smack into him.

Richie wiggled into the machine next to Dig Dug and shot Dustin a warning look.

"Easy, tiger. Will's got some stuff he needs to say." Richie said, quiet enough that no one else noticed that he'd been about to sneak off after their friends. "Now watch my back. Nerdlord over there's been trying to poach my score."

"What?" Dustin said, automatically suspicious.

"I insulted him once or twice and he's pissed, numbnuts. Think with your brain."

"Oh my god. You're going to get us kicked out." Dustin hissed.

"No, I'm going to distract you long enough to get Mike to get his fat head out of his ass." Dustin was silent for a moment.

"You're-" an asshole didn't seem to cover it.

"Take your time, I've got some scores to beat."

21. Chapter 21

Richie isn't actually that awful on Max's scale of such things.

Admittedly, she knows hers is skewed. She had to deal with Billy after all.

Richie's low grade ambient dickishness and mockery are annoying, but not much more than that. He's pretty harmless, all things considered. Unless you're a clown, and she'd heard that story and really couldn't blame him. She'd want to take a bat to them too.

And he's fun to trash talk with at the arcade, and they have a private goal to have one of them at the top of every leaderboard in the entire arcade. Considering how much they suck at some of the games, it's going to take a lot of quarters.

She knows what jealous looks like too. Mike's jealous because Richie's getting some of Will's attention (and if he and Will aren't doing something she'll eat her skateboard) and Richie... well, Richie misses his friends and is just a bit jealous of them too.

So she takes bets (it's a good way to fund her quest) and keeps her eyes open and when things explode because Mike can't man up and say the magical words "Hey Will, do you want to date?" she isn't actually all that surprised.

She writes Will the shortest note (going by how long everyone else spends writing) but she trusts that he knows she cares about him. He's like her brother, and he's a lot better at that than Billy ever was. Billy certainly never helped her do her hair before a dance.

And look, if Will wants to date Richie, she'll go threaten to bury

Richie alive (because fellow monster fighter or not she's not about to trust him with Will's heart) but she'll also do what she can to keep the world from crushing them.

But she really hopes Mike gets a clue. She's got money riding on this.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have a beloved headcanon that Max cheerfully runs book on all manner of things.

22. Chapter 22

Notes for the Chapter:

WE'RE FINALLY HERE! Hope you like it!

Mike fidgeted restlessly outside of the arcade, his fingers fluttering like runaway birds as he tried to work his way up to what he wanted to say. Will knew, well enough, that interrupting him here, or trying to guess, would just frustrate Mike more. And he wanted to know what Mike was thinking, but he knew he'd have to wait a while to get there.

"I'm sorry." Mike said, after a minute. "What I said was stupid, and it wasn't true. I don't want you to join another party, but I'm scared that that's what you want."

Will was struck by the brutal honesty in his tone, at the fact that Mike Wheeler was admitting to being scared of something.

"I don't want to leave the party." Will said quietly. It was the only response that he could think of, and it was the truth, to boot.

"I'm sorry that I'm letting Richie get under my skin, but... It'd be easy, I bet, to replace me with him. We look the same."

"Richie wears glasses." Will pointed out, just for the way that Mike's lips twitched.

"Okay, you got me there. But even with the glasses, it would be easy to pretend, if you wanted to."

"You don't act the same." Will continued, as if he hadn't heard.

"You're much nicer, when you're not being a dick. Actually, you're still nicer, even when you are being a dick."

"I meant what I said," Mike continued, soldiering on, tactfully ignoring Will's jab. "He can join the party, and if you want, I can

leave. Metaphorically speaking, I drew first blood. That means it's up to me to make it up to you."

"I'm pretty sure Richie doesn't want to join. He's still kind of holding out hope that his mom will let them move back to join his old friends." Will shrugged, a small thing that conveyed more emotion than he cared to read into. "He's just lonely. I don't like seeing people lonely."

"Yeah, well, you're sweet like that." Mike grumbled.

The pair fell into silence, Will's heart stuttering at Mike's words.

"Friends don't lie." He said, at last. The age-old saying that kept them all together. "Even by omission. You should have told me you were scared, so I could have told you it was stupid."

"Will," Mike said, his voice half hysterical. "C'mon. There's only ever been one thing I was scared of."

"Is it small spaces?"

"It's losing you." Mike shook his head. "I just can't do it. I couldn't live with myself if I couldn't get you back. From the Upside-Down, from the Mind-Flayer, and if it wound up being my fault that I lost you, I... I don't know what I'd do."

More honesty.

Will's head was swimming.

Don't read into it. He told himself, but how could he not?

Notes for the Chapter:

Still not done with you lovely people though!

23. Chapter 23

Will forced himself to take a deep breath, to ignore the pounding in his chest, to not read anything into that.

"Mike. You've been my best friend since kindergarten. When we were in third grade and Angelica Winslow pushed me off the swing you told her her hair looked like a haystack and she should go back to the farm she came from and then she got in trouble for hitting you and even though you were the one with a black eye, you hugged me and told me she was just jealous because I was cuter than she was and everyone knew it. Richie could never replace you. You were the one who never stopped looking for me when I went missing. You were the one who held my hand in the hospital. I don't know why you're being dumb enough to think he could compete with that but you are being really really dumb."

And he's shaking, just a bit, because what he wants more than anything in the entire world is for Mike to say something like "I'm jealous he gets to kiss you because I want to kiss you." But he knows that isn't going to happen and not just because no one knows about the whole kissing thing.

"Yeah, Richie looks like you. But I don't think anyone has a good enough imagination to pretend he was you. And I don't ever want you to leave the party. You're my best friend Mike."

Will stops, bites his lip to trap the other words on his tongue. 'And I'm in love with you. It might be a lot of fun to kiss Richie because he's good at kissing but I don't love Richie Tozier. Not the way I love you,' and 'I know you probably still love El or something and I don't spy on you when you're changing or anything. I just love you.'

Those are not words that need to be said.

He manages a smile instead and gets out the words "That's not ever going to change."

Which is true.

Not as true as "Half the reason I spend so much time with him is because he does look like you, and he's willing to kiss me and I know that's as close as I'll ever get." but he's not saying that either.

And he's not going to kiss Mike's cheek like he wants to (like he used to be able to, back when they were little kids) but he is going to give Mike his best smile. 'Mike is my friend' he reminds the cold, bruised place in his heart, 'And that's enough, even if we aren't ever going to be anything more'.

24. Chapter 24

Mike ducked his head to the side, his brow furrowed.

"Don't be so sure about that." He muttered, his voice sounding pained. "What are you talking about?" Will asked, his nerves back in full force. What could Mike mean? Was there something he thought was going to drive a wedge between them?

Will stepped forward, putting a supportive hand on Mike's arm.

"Whatever it is that's bugging you, Mike, tell me and we can work through it together. You're not alone, and at this point, I think I owe you one or two."

"s two you owe me, junior." Mike said, a smile breaking across his face, as Will had known it would when given the opportunity to repeat the quote.

"I'm here for you, Mike. Just like you've always been there for me."

Mike darted furtive glances around the empty parking lot and fidgeted in place for a moment longer than necessary. Clearly, he was still nervous. "You can tell me anything." Will said, for posterity.

Will could still see the hesitation in Mike's eyes, and he couldn't help the way that it stung, the way his heart hurt, ever so slightly, at the thought that maybe Mike just... wouldn't trust him with whatever this was.

"And hey," Will said, when the silence stretched further. "If there's nothing, then there's nothing, but if that nothing is something, then you can tell me. Whenever you're ready, you can tell me anything."

Mike made a strangled noise in the back of his throat.

He took a deep breath, and then another.

"There is one other thing." Mike began. "Something else I probably

need to tell you."

Will's stomach dropped again.

He kept his stoic facade up and running, just in case.

25. Chapter 25

It was, Lucas decided, scary when Richie and Max teamed up. If they ever decided to do it outside the arcade, there would be hell loose in Hawkins. Especially if Eleven tagged along.

In this case, they were completely crushing the past efforts of any other pair of players. They weren't even saying anything, just "On your right" or "Your powerup" and things like that, eyes glued to the screen.

He and Dustin shared a look. He and Dustin had managed to get a decent score but the pair currently at the controls had ten times their admittedly not top ten worthy effort. Eleven, on the machine next to them, was not actually using her powers and was being much louder, insulting the characters with a creative flair she'd likely picked up from Steve, given the number of sports references said insults contained.

It was after Max and Richie annihilated the fourth boss (that Lucas had never even seen before), that he realized Mike and Will were nowhere to be found. And he knew they'd gone out to talk (and Mike had better be fixing things because a party needed a wizard) but seemed to be taking an awful long time. And he wasn't worried something had happened to Will, because they'd have heard Mike putting up the mother of all fights but still.

"Stop freaking out dipshit, you're throwing us off our game." Richie snaps, eyes still locked to the screen.

"Richie, you're a dick. Lucas, stop worrying, everything'll be fine. If I have to, I'll shove Mike into the river," Max added and Lucas forced his worries away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for missing a couple of days folks. Happy New Year though!

26. Chapter 26

Steve exhaled slowly, breathing out what might have been a sigh and what might have been a groan. He tried to avoid saying that he hated things, but if he was being entirely honest, he absolutely despised his job.

He eyed the phone on his desk, both hoping it would and hoping it wouldn't ring.

He supposed it made him a resolutely terrible person, but he almost wished that the kids would call him with some sort of punching-things emergency.

But then again, his tie was suffocating him, and if he had to remind another person of their cost-effective benefits, then he'd probably scream and start punching things anyway. And he might hate this job, but he really needed it.

The phone rang.

"Harrington," He greeted, begging the universe that it was Dustin, asking what he should tell Mike to say, or Max, asking her to come wail on her brother, again, even though that hadn't ended well for Steve last time. That was how thoroughly bored he was.

The voice on the other end of the phone did not belong to one of the kids he'd so unceremoniously adopted.

The voice on the other end of the line belonged to his boss.

And he was already yelling.

Steve stifled another sigh behind an obedient 'yes sir,' and grimaced, wondering who the hell he'd become. At least the kids not calling meant he didn't need to do any sort of damage control. That was a plus, if ever he'd thought of one.

Here? Here he was going to need to do all sorts of damage control.

Notes for the Chapter:

Not sure what Steve does in this fic. Something that helps him be a good babysitter. ...Something that means he has to wear a tie and deal with people on the phone. Poor Steve.

27. Chapter 27

Dustin really really really hoped that Mike and Will being out in the parking lot for so long meant that they were getting everything worked out. He never thought he'd desperately want Mike and Will to start dating but it would fix all sorts of problems and also mean that hopefully Mike and Richie wouldn't get into a fight. He had a distinct feeling it would go the same way Steve's last fight with Billy had gone.

With any luck, the storm would dissipate and the party could get back to both pen and paper and very physical adventures, friendship even stronger than before. He'd been looking forward to the camping trip next month, and he wasn't sure where they would stay if they couldn't stay in the revamped and improved Castle Byers. (It had taken them weeks and multiple trips to the hardware store and the help of Hopper, Steve and the entire party, but the end result had brought Will to delighted tears and the new password being 'Mellon'.)

The idea that Will had somehow been snatched by something again drifted through his mind, but was snuffed by the fact that Eleven was still with them, losing rather badly at Dig Dug, even with Max coaching her, instead of on the war path to annihilate whatever had fucked with one of her friends.

Mike might have a bit of a reputation for being protective, but Eleven's protective streak was longer than the Nile and wider than Europe.

Dustin absently considered calling Steve to update him on matters, but remembered that probably wasn't the best of ideas. Steve was at work and wouldn't necessarily welcome any interruption that didn't require immediate intervention.

So he fed his quarters into the game in front of him, ignored Richie's

snarky vulgarity filled taunt and set about killing monsters.

Notes for the Chapter:

Just a couple of chapters left! Have an extra because I missed a couple days!

28. Chapter 28

Mike shuffled his feet again, his eyes looking everywhere but at Will as he sorted his thoughts. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, looking a little green.

"Mike?" Will prompted.

Mike exhaled, pushing air through his lips like he was blowing up a balloon.

"Your hair is really pretty" Mike said, in a rush.

What?

"What?"

Mike groaned.

"I knew I shouldn't have listened to Dustin." He grumbled. He put his hands out in front of him, as if warding off further questions. "I like you." He said haltingly. Will's heart stopped. He remembered dying, vaguely, but this... this wasn't it. He inhaled shakily and his heart started again. Clearly this was real. It wasn't a dream, it wasn't his brain being kind to him in his last moments.

"Well, I like you too, Mike, that's how the whole friendship thing works." Will replied, but his voice was too high pitched, and his heart was rabbiting. He knew he didn't sound convincing.

"No." Mike said, reaching up and catching Will's hand in his own. "Seeing you with Richie sucked Will. And not just because I was afraid you'd replace me. I dunno." Mike mumbled. He turned away, dropping his hand, and the warm breeze in it's wake was like ice.

Before Will could come up with something that would make this all better, Mike shook his head again, a determined glint in his eyes. "No, that's not it. I do know. I like you as more than a friend, Will."

Will squeaked. He wasn't sure what else to do. He felt his face flush and his eyes darted to one side, and then the other. He met Mike's eyes and looked away.

"Is this a prank?" He asked at last, because it was the only thing he could think of. He thought his heart might just break if Mike started laughing.

Mike looked nauseous again.

"No, it isn't." He said quietly.

"You mean it?" Will asked, hope creeping back into his voice. Something in his face must have bolstered Mike's resolve because he managed a small smile.

"I mean it."

29. Chapter 29

Notes for the Chapter:

Last chapter lovely readers!

"About *fucking* time. I mean, I'm going to miss the makeouts but- Oh fuck this means the 'Oh Mike is so wonderful!' is going to get worse, isn't it? He's bad enough now I can't imagine what that's going to be like. I do have a book to lend you two though, you're absofuckinglutely going to need it if Mike's this clueless."

Richie's voice, full of smirking humor, broke the moment.

"Anyway, finish the 'We're both weird nerds and therefore should totally date before everyone around us smothers us with a fucking pillow because we are both idiots who should have been doing fucking tooth rotting sweetness fucking months ago. Honestly Wheeler, it's no wonder my grades are always higher than yours. Now get your asses inside, Mike's up on Street Fighter and I wanna watch Max kick his virtual ass."

And Will lets out another squeak, and Mike glares before stopping and blinking and looking at Will. "Wait. Makeouts?"

"Um..."

"Tiny Byers wasn't getting any from you so he figured he'd get them from me. So you're welcome because he sucked at first. Although not literally. Now hurry it up."

With a final flash of teeth, Richie darted back inside.

Mike was clearly torn between anger (at Richie) and hurt and confusion and what snaps him from it is Will's soft voice.

"Does... does this mean we can't... I mean... I pretended he was you sometimes... he always teased me about it... But I've liked you for a really long time and I was so certain-"

His halting, almost stammering explanation is stopped by Mike pulling him closer and kissing him.

And it's a lot different than kissing Richie. Mike tastes different, feels different, is light and soft and almost shy, as if he's not entirely sure what Will will welcome. And all Will can really do is sigh and cling and relish how good and right it feels until Mike pulls away, just enough to say "No more kissing Richie."

"No more kissing Richie." Will agrees, just a bit breathless.

And then Mike smiles at him and it warms him all the way down to his toes, temporarily drowns the cold place in the warmth of the affection.

"And now I better go get my butt kicked by Max."

And Will feels bold, bolstered by everything, and so he says "I'll give you a kiss to make it better," before pecking Mike on the cheek and taking his hand.

"I'll hold you to that." Mike tells him, grinning wider and heading into the arcade.

Notes for the Chapter:

Finally done with this! My cowriter and I are working on another fic (of the Richie/Will variety) which we'll be posting once we're done with it, but if you'd like to send me prompts for things in the

meantime, just send them to DigitalMoriarty over on Tumblr or leave a comment here. (If you liked NotQuiteHumanAnymore's chapters, they're scarletwix over on Tumblr)

Author's Note:

This fic is, in fact, complete. But we're posting it one chapter at a time. Lucky you?